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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000215

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ETRD ECON UNSC CH KS KN VM

SUBJECT: WHAT USE ARE LIPS AND TEETH? VIETNAM'S AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

REF: A. 07 HANOI 1901

1B. 08 HANOI 905

1C. 08 HANOI 1311

1D. HANOI 192

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Classified By: PolCouns Brian Aggeler. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Vietnam's foreign policy, normally pragmatic to a fault, betrays a certain tension when it comes to North Korea. Influential voices in the Party speak of ideological affinity and historical bonds, while others in Vietnam's foreign policy establishment advocate a more sober assessment of Vietnam's interests. It is difficult to gauge how much influence Vietnam has with the DPRK. General Secretary Nong Duc Manh visited Pyongyang in 2007 and there was for a time fevered speculation that Kim Jong-il would reciprocate. Relations appeared to cool in 2008, and with them optimism that the DPRK was keen to explore a "Vietnam model." Vietnam strongly supports the Six-Party process and has expressed an eagerness to facilitate discussions; however, it is not clear how useful this would actually be. Hanoi is reluctant to apply pressure on Pyongyang, rhetorical or otherwise, and is solicitous of what it views as China's prerogatives. More to the point, perhaps: though it is not official policy, some suggest that North Korea's nuclear ambitions must ultimately be accommodated. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) A note on sources: This report draws on conversations January 15 - March 2 with a range of Embassy contacts including the MFA's Directors General for Northeast Asia and International Organizations, Bui Tong Van and Le Hoai Trung; Ministry of Industry and Trade Deputy Director for Asia-Pacific, Chu Thanh Trung; the Deputy Director for Northeast Asia on the Communist Party's External Relations Commission, Le Quang Ba, and the Commission's Director for North America and Europe, Pham Tien Nhien; Deputy Director General of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV) Luan Thuy Duong and DAV scholar Nguyen Hong Son; Director of Korean Studies at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Ngo Xuan Binh; and the Chief Foreign Affairs Editor of Hanoi Moi newspaper, Nguyen Quoc Chinh.

THE DEAR LEADER'S (ABORTED) MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

13. (C) In the months following General Secretary Nong Duc Manh's October 2007 visit to Pyongyang (ref A), there was feverish speculation that Kim Jong-il would travel to Vietnam. The MFA's DG for Northeast Asian Affairs, Bui Tong Van, confirmed that Vietnam remains keen to host the North Korean leader and reissued an invitation as recently as the July 2008 visit of DPRK FM Pak Ui Chun (ref B). Van's counterpart on the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) External Relations Commission, Le Quang Ba, went a step further, claiming that the North Korean leader had actually accepted the offer. In the event, the visit did not take place, and Ba declined to speculate on possible future dates. Nor would he or the MFA offer a specific reason why the visit did not occur. Contacts in the academic and think tank community pointed to ill health; coordination, logistics, and security complications connected with traveling through China by train; and a general retrenchment in the DPRK's external relations as possible reasons why Kim may have decided not to come to Hanoi.

14. (C) How likely the visit was in the first place is open to debate. Regardless, in retrospect, 2007 and early 2008 appear to have marked something of a high-water mark in DPRK-Vietnam relations. According to the CPV's Ba, the pace of reciprocal visits accelerated during this time; Ba himself visited Pyongyang three times in 2007. More interestingly, DPRK officials, previously mute about Vietnam's economic success, began to offer praise for the country's two-decade-long program of "renovation" (doi moi). Things have cooled considerably over the past year, however, although relations are nowhere near their 2004 nadir when the DPRK withdrew its ambassador to protest

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Vietnam's decision to permit the resettlement of North Korean refugees to South Korea. As the Director of Political and Security Studies at the MFA-affiliated Diplomatic Academy (DAV), Nguyen Hong Son, explained, factors external to the Vietnam-DPRK relationship are largely to blame for the current lull: North Korean pique toward the more conservative South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, setbacks in the Six-Party Talks, and, possibly, leadership uncertainty in Pyongyang. The most recent visit, a September 2008 trip to Pyongyang by MPS Minister Le Hong Anh, took place without fanfare or apparent result.

Lips and Teeth...

15. (C) Ba, a longtime Embassy contact who holds the position of Deputy Director of the CPV External Relations Commission's Northeast Asia Division, went to some length to underscore Vietnam and North Korea's ideological affinity: as close as "lips and teeth," in the old Communist argot. Ba insisted that much of the news about the DPRK is "distorted" and praised Pyongyang's huge stadium, efficient subway system, and cultural festivals. In these areas at least, Vietnam lagged ten years behind North Korea, Ba lamented. (We responded that Vietnam's ability to feed its people and to reduce poverty was considerably more impressive.) Most in Vietnam take a more sober view of North Korea, to be sure. Nevertheless, Vietnam's leadership is keenly aware that Vietnam and North Korea are among a very small number of nations in the world that remain even nominally communist.

16. (C) Whether or not this translates into influence is another matter. In a separate meeting, the outgoing Director of the External Relations Commission's North America and Europe Division, Pham Tien Nhien, bluntly acknowledged that while Vietnam maintains an embassy in Pyongyang, its activities and functions are strictly limited. North Korea remains a "hermit kingdom," even to its communist brethren, Nhien stated. DG Van likewise

conceded that Vietnam's access to information is modest, as is its influence.

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¶7. (C) Outside the Party and MFA, opinions about North Korea tend to be more direct. "Vietnam does not want to lose friends, but it is sometimes really hard to understand North Korea's actions," commented the Chief Foreign Affairs Editor of the Party-affiliated newspaper Hanoi Moi, Nguyen Quoc Chinh. The Director of the state-sponsored Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences' (VASS) Center for Korean Studies, Ngo Xuan Binh, was downright caustic in his assessment. Mixing his metaphors, Binh insisted that North Korea and Vietnam were no longer allies, though they remained "friends," and compared Vietnam's approach to North and South Korea to that of a husband with two wives. One is old, impoverished, and cranky; the other is young, beautiful, and rich. Vietnam wants to be faithful to its first wife, Binh continued, but it is obvious who is the more attractive.

¶8. (SBU) Vietnam has practically no trade with North Korea, apart from a small amount of rice exports given as assistance, and no investment, while its economic ties with South Korea are substantial. So small is its trade with North Korea that Vietnam does not even compile statistics, according the Deputy Director of Ministry of Trade and Industry's Asia-Pacific Division, Chu Thang Trung. By contrast, South Korea is Vietnam's second-largest source of foreign investment, with over 5.75 billion dollars in actual (spent) investment; South Korea is also Vietnam's sixth trade partner, with two-way trade reaching 8.8 billion dollars in 2008.

Doi Moi for North Korea?

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¶9. (C) Regardless of their opinions about North Korea itself, our MFA, Party, and think tank contacts maintained that Vietnam stood ready to serve as a development model for North Korea. The benefit of economic reform, it was generally understood, was to have been the subtext for Kim's visit, much as it was when the North Korean leader visited southern China in January 2006. Our contacts offered varied assessments as to whether Pyongyang was receptive. Some, such as the CPV's Ba, saw continued interest. Most, however, conceded that North Korea was even less likely than Burma to pursue Doi Moi-like policies (ref C). In a recent discussion with the DCM (ref D), the MFA's Director General for International Organizations Le Hoai Trung, said that even friends from Cuba had voiced skepticism about the DPRK's willingness to engage in reform. As a measure of North Korea's isolation, VASS scholar Binh said that the DPRK could actually learn from Burma and its experience joining ASEAN.

Six-Party Talks: Eager to Seem Helpful

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¶10. (C) Vietnam professes strong support for the Six-Party Talks, our contacts stressed, and wants to be seen as helpful. Track II contacts in particular emphasized that Vietnam enjoys comparatively good relations with the DPRK, as well as the other Six-Party countries, and could be useful as a conduit. The Diplomatic Academy's Son suggested that Vietnam could contribute to the Six-Party process as ASEAN chair in 2010, perhaps facilitating contact through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), of which North Korea is a member. In a separate meeting, Son's colleague, DAV Deputy DG Luan Thuy Duong, went as far as to suggest that ASEAN join the Six-Party Talks as an observer. Several of our contacts pointed to Vietnam's

willingness to host 6PT working group discussions on the normalization of the DPRK's relations with Japan in March 2007 as an example of the positive role that Vietnam is prepared to play.

Comment: How Useful is Vietnam when it Comes to the DPRK?

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¶11. (C) The 2007 discussions in Vietnam are instructive, though not necessarily in an encouraging way. The talks ended in acrimony, as the DPRK refused to even discuss the issue of abductions. Hanoi could do little to restart the meetings, and it is unclear how much it tried. This gets to the heart of it. Even as our contacts emphasize Vietnam's strong support for the Six-Party Talks, they consistently dismissed any suggestion that Hanoi could apply pressure, rhetorical or otherwise, on Pyongyang. (And to be fair, it is unclear what leverage Vietnam has.) Vietnam is, moreover, extremely solicitous of China; our contacts regularly deflected discussion of the need to present North Korea with a unified front by pointing to Beijing as the DPRK's patron and benefactor. And finally -- and more to the point -- Hanoi's commitment to achieving and enforcing a complete, verifiable disarmament is perhaps open to doubt. As a matter of official policy, Hanoi remains absolutely dedicated to fully achieving the Six-Party Talks' goals. As a practical matter, however, Vietnam regularly counsels flexibility and patience, and suggests that it is up to the United States to make concessions; Neatly, and baldly, summing up what our official interlocutors may be too diplomatic to articulate directly, one think tank contact said that, ultimately, the United States may have to live with a handful of North Korean nuclear weapons.

MICHALAK